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## ABSTRACT

Questions are addressed that focus on why lower class and minority group test takers score lower on standardized tests than their middle class Anglo counterparts. The questions include the following: (1) In what ways can dialect differences affect testing? (2) How can dialect differences directly affect a test of language? (3) Shouldn't standard English forms be upheld as the correct norm for language tests when the goals of education typically require students to be familiar with standard English? (4) Is there a method for predicting which test items in a language test might be dialect-biased? (5) Are some tests more biased than others with respect to dialects? (6) In what ways might dialect differences influence tests not focused on language? (7) What knowledge about testing should educators have in order to be fair to test takers who speak vernacular dialects of English? and (8) What might be done to make tests more dialectically fair? (VWL)

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**ERIC** Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics  
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# ERIC Digest

## Dialect Differences and Testing

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The fact that lower class and minority group test takers consistently score lower on standardized tests than their middle class Anglo counterparts has given rise to much discussion as researchers, educators, and the general public attempt to sort out the significance of this scoring differential. Obviously, a number of factors have to be considered in explaining this phenomenon, but one dimension that has become increasingly prominent is the role of language differences. Is the dialect of the test taker a significant factor in test score differences between mainstream and non-mainstream cultural groups? If dialect is a factor, what, if anything, might be done about it? These questions seem vital for assessment specialists, educators, and other consumers of test score information, including test takers themselves.

### *In What Ways Can Dialect Differences Affect Testing?*

In some cases, tests focus specifically on language structures, as in specialized tests that assess speech and language development, and in specific sections of achievement tests that are designed to measure achievement in language usage. However, the role of language in testing extends beyond test items focused on some aspect of language. The language used for giving directions, for tapping information in other content areas, and even for interaction among test administrators plays an essential role in testing.

### *How Can Dialect Differences Directly Affect a Test of Language?*

The construction of items in a standardized language test starts with a definition of a *correct* or *normative* response for each item. Traditionally, language tests have limited the notion of correctness to those forms that are found in Standard English. This means that forms occurring in vernacular English dialects are classified as incorrect even though they may be normative for a community. For example, if a language development test classifies as incorrect the absence of the plural *-s* in a sentence such as, *We live three mile down the road*, or the use of a different irregular verb form of *come* in *Yesterday we come down to the house*, the language development of children using these forms as a part of their community dialect would be considered delayed by comparison with Standard English speakers. Defining a correct response on the basis of a dialect different from that naturally and normally used in the vernacular speech community of the test taker opens language tests to a type of "dialect bias."

*Shouldn't Standard English Forms Be Upheld as the "Correct" Norm for Language Tests When the Goals of Education Typically Require Students To Be Familiar with Standard English?*

Certainly, if a test is designed specifically to measure a student's familiarity with Standard English, then the forms of

vernacular English dialects should be considered incorrect. However, the stated goal of many language tests is not to measure students' familiarity with Standard English forms. For example, *language development tests* are typically designed to see if a child is acquiring general language skills, not specific forms of Standard English. The equation of general language development with the acquisition of Standard English may severely penalize children who do not use this variety. Significant language deficits or delays are often assumed for vernacular dialect speakers given such tests when the responses classified as incorrect may simply indicate a natural language difference.

Responses on standardized *language achievement tests*, designed to measure what students have acquired as a part of their formal educational process, may be misinterpreted if dialect differences are not considered. In this case, the role of dialect is more subtle. Most language achievement tests focus on the student's ability to differentiate between standard and vernacular English forms. For example, the student is asked to select the correct response to the following sentences: *Father and (them/they) are going on a trip* or *George (come/came) home and cried*. The problem with items such as these is that they may measure different things for different groups of speakers. For a Standard English speaker, an achievement test focusing on the recognition of Standard English forms may measure what the student already brings to school from the home community—inner knowledge of the standard dialect. For a student from a vernacular dialect speaking community, the test may actually measure an aspect of achievement, if the educational system incorporates the introduction of the standard dialect into its curriculum. The underlying problem of language achievement tests focused on recognizing Standard English forms lies in the comparison of standard and vernacular dialect speakers as if both groups of speakers started from the same linguistic baseline when, in fact, they started at very different points linguistically.

### *Is There a Method for Predicting Which Language Items in a Test Might Be Dialect-Biased?*

Potential dialect bias may be predicted by comparing the items considered correct in the scoring of the test with the dialect patterns of the dialect communities represented by test takers. Linguistic descriptions of vernacular dialects of English would show that many of these varieties use *come* in past tense constructions (e.g., *George come home and cried*) as a regular part of the dialect pattern; they might also show that there are some vernacular dialects (e.g., Appalachian, Black English) that do not require the plural marker *-s* with a noun of weight and measure—such as *three mile*—as a regular language pattern or rule. There are now a number of dialect descriptions that can be used as resources to alert concerned test constructors and

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administrators to those items in tests that might be dialectally sensitive.

### *Are Some Tests More Biased than Others with Respect to Dialects?*

Tests that focus on the more superficial aspects of language tend to be more dialectally sensitive than those that focus on the deeper levels of language organization. For example, focus on the way a particular language item is formed, such as the -s plural (*three miles*), the possessive -s (*John's hat*), or the irregular marking of past tense (*They knew*) involves a relatively superficial level of language organization. On the other hand, focusing on the more basic semantic concepts of *plurality*, *possession*, and *past tense*, regardless of how they are explicitly marked (e.g., *three mile* indicates plurality despite the absence of -s, *They knowed* indicates past tense, although the way it is marked is different from the Standard English marking) involves a deeper level of language organization. Because the majority of dialect differences typically affect the more superficial aspects of language forms rather than the deeper levels of language organization, the following principle can be applied to language tests in relation to dialect differences: *The more superficial and limited the scope of language ability tapped in a testing instrument, the greater the likelihood that the instrument will be inappropriate for speakers beyond the immediate population upon which it was normed.*

### *In What Ways Might Dialect Differences Influence Tests NOT Focused on Language?*

Because language is typically used as a medium for obtaining information in tests regardless of the content area, test directions and questions are language tasks of one type or another. Within standardized testing, particular conventions have been developed in which language is used in specialized ways. This test language register may, for example, frame questions in a way that is peculiar to testing as compared with ordinary language usage, so that a question is constructed as an incomplete statement (e.g., *To prevent scum from forming in a partly used can of paint one should...*) or a question is formatted to set up a choice between possible answers (e.g., *Which of the following tools is most appropriate for "bleeding" a brake?*). Although such language conventions are different from ordinary, everyday language use for all test takers, including middle class Standard English speakers, these conventions seem further removed from those who naturally use vernacular dialects. The following principle seems to apply: *The more distant a person's everyday speaking style is from the language used in testing, the greater the potential for task interference from the language register of the test.*

Many tests rely on special ways of organizing and talking about language to tap information. For example, specialized notions like *synonymy* and *antinomy* may become processes through which word definition is accessed, but these tasks involve peculiar relationships involving word replaceability or opposition. These are special tasks extracted from natural language usage, where the meaning of a word is likely to be defined through a story example or context that uses the word appropriately. Thus, the notion of antinomy may be legitimately interpreted as "very different from" rather than as a single dimension of opposition, so that *tall* and *far* might be considered opposites as readily as *tall* and *short*. In a similar way, rhyming may be used to tap a person's ability to decode letters in reading or spelling when, in fact, these skills have little to do with decoding. In addition, rhyming patterns may

differ across dialects, so that *fine* and *mind* or *sad* and *bad* rhyme in one dialect but not in another.

On a broader, but equally significant level, a peculiar socialization exists that seems endemic to the testing situation. This socialization assumes particular experiences with language, test taking, and an orientation into the experimental frame of formalized testing. The experimental framework for testing calls for relatively *context-independent text*, in the sense that the language discourse is not embedded in the local context or practice. Some individuals seem more prone towards *context-dependent text* when it comes to the social occasion of testing, in the sense that they rely more on the local context and assumed background knowledge of their immediate sociolinguistic community as they enter into the experimental frame of testing.

### *What Knowledge about Testing Should Educators Have in Order To Be Fair to Test Takers Who Speak Vernacular Dialects of English?*

For the general consumer of test score information, the following recommendations seem appropriate: 1) Consider what the test *claims* to be measuring in relation to what it *actually* measures; 2) Consider what assumptions about language underlie the test; 3) Consider what kinds of language-related tasks are necessary for the test taker to participate adequately in the test; 4) Examine demographic information provided in the test manual about linguistic and cultural groups on which the test was standardized; 5) Consider how test results can be interpreted for different dialect groups.

For language specialists (e.g., speech and language pathologists, language arts educators), the following additional recommendations should be considered:

1) Become familiar with the linguistic characteristics of communities represented by test takers; 2) Be able to identify linguistic responses to test questions that might be attributable to dialect differences; 3) Complement standardized, formal measures of language with assessment strategies more focused on underlying language ability in real communicative contexts; 4) Gather ethnographic information on the language use of test takers from non-mainstream communities in a natural setting.

### *What Might Be Done To Make Tests More Dialectally Fair?*

Various alternatives have been suggested for reducing the potential of language-related bias in testing (Vaughn-Cooke, 1983), including the standardization of existing tests on vernacular dialect speakers, the revision of existing tests in ways that would make them appropriate for vernacular dialect speakers, and the development of new tests specifically designed for speakers of vernacular varieties. There are advantages and disadvantages associated with each of the alternatives proposed, and it is apparent that there is no quick fix sociolinguistic solution to the testing dilemma. Educators and general consumers of test information must develop a more critical approach to the consideration of standardized testing.

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